



BRIEFING

Asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK

AUTHORS: Peter William Walsh
Nuni Jorgensen
PUBLISHED: 01/07/2024



This briefing examines asylum, refugee resettlement, and bespoke humanitarian schemes in the UK.

Key Points

In 2022, an estimated 0.6% of the UK population consisted of people who came to the country seeking asylum. The majority of these people were long-term residents who had been in the UK for more than a decade.

Asylum seekers accounted for 7% of immigration to the UK in 2023, compared with 4% who arrived on bespoke humanitarian schemes for Hongkongers, Afghans and Ukrainians.

In 2023, the top five most common countries of nationality for people who applied for asylum from inside the UK were Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

Data from 2023 shows that asylum success rates are very similar among young men and women.

Asylum refusals are often overturned on appeal. As a result, the share of asylum seekers recognised as refugees by the end of the asylum process is substantially higher than at the initial decision stage.

Between 2014 and 2023, the waiting time for an initial asylum decision increased significantly, generating a backlog in the processing of claims, but data from the first quarter of 2024 indicate that the backlog is beginning to fall.

Asylum seekers waiting for decisions are more concentrated in certain local authorities in the UK than others. In contrast, Ukrainians on bespoke humanitarian routes, are more evenly distributed across the country.

Despite being expensive for the government and considered inadequate in terms of integration, the use of contingency accommodation to house asylum seekers – particularly in hotels – has significantly increased since the pandemic.

The financial cost of operating the UK's asylum system reached a record high of £4 billion in the financial year 2022/23.

The value of asylum support payments fell 29% in real terms (that is, accounting for inflation) between 2000 and 2023, despite nominal increases.

In 2023, the UK ranked fifth in the absolute number of asylum claims received when compared to EU+ countries. But when adjusted for population size, it falls to 20th place.

Understanding the policy

Asylum

Asylum is the protection that is granted by a nation-state to a person who has fled their country to escape a serious threat to their life or liberty. People granted this protection, which arises out of the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the “Refugee Convention”), are called refugees. The word refugee is also used more generally to refer to anyone who has fled their country to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster, even if they have not been granted protection under the Refugee Convention.

The Refugee Convention defines a refugee as a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”. An *asylum seeker* (or asylum applicant) is a person who has applied for recognition as a refugee under the Refugee Convention, to which [over 140 nations](#) are signatories.

There is no law that says asylum seekers must make their asylum claim in the first safe country they arrive in after leaving their country of origin. However, under an EU law called the Dublin III Regulation, asylum seekers could in theory be transferred to the first EU member state in which they arrived after leaving their origin country. Because of Brexit, the UK is no longer a part of the Dublin arrangements, but has introduced new laws on “inadmissibility” to bar people from claiming asylum in the UK if they had an earlier presence in or connection to a safe third country.

To claim asylum in the UK, a person must be in the UK. It is not possible to apply from outside the country, and there is no asylum visa to enable people to travel to the UK legally to apply for asylum. Under the Illegal Migration Act, which became law in July 2023 but is not fully in force, anyone entering the UK irregularly, such as by small boat, lorry, or by using false documents, will not have their asylum claims evaluated (see the Migration Observatory commentary on [UK policies to deter people from claiming asylum](#)). This means that people who do not have visa-free travel and who do not come on a visa for other purposes, such as tourism or study, do not have a direct means to seek asylum in the UK.

In cases where an asylum claim is successfully lodged, there are three possible outcomes. First, an applicant can be recognised as a refugee and granted asylum with five years’ permission to stay in the UK, after which they may apply, free of charge, for permanent residence. Second, the applicant is judged not to qualify for refugee status but granted permission to stay in the UK for humanitarian or other reasons. These statuses include humanitarian protection (HP); discretionary leave (DL); leave under family or private life rules; and unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) leave. Third, the asylum claim can be refused. If a claim is refused, the applicant can appeal against the initial decision, and if the appeal is successful be granted permission to stay.

All applications request protection for a ‘main applicant’, and some include requests for protection for the main applicant’s dependent family members as well, specifically: their spouse, civil partner, or unmarried partner; and any children under 18, but not dependent parents. The dependants on an application receive the same outcome as the main applicant ([Immigration Rules, Paragraph 349](#)).

The Home Office states that asylum in the UK should be sought at the first available opportunity, on arrival at a port of entry. Those who do not claim asylum on arrival can instead apply in person for asylum at the Asylum Intake Unit in London.

Asylum seekers’ right to work and benefits

Asylum seekers are not generally permitted to work in the UK while their claim is being considered. If they are destitute, they can apply for free accommodation, as well as asylum support, which is set at £49.18 per person per week (around £7 per day). The Home Office may grant an asylum applicant permission to work only if both (1) their asylum claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months through no fault of the applicant, and (2) the job is on the [Immigration Salary List](#) (which includes social care and some skilled trades). [Campaign groups](#) have argued that asylum seekers and their adult dependants should be able to work in any job after having waited six months for a decision on their claim or further

submission have argued that asylum seekers and their adult dependants should be able to work in any job after having waited six months for a decision on their claim or further submission. Asylum seekers are, however, permitted to study while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. Asylum seekers are, however, permitted to study while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim.

Dispersal

Since 2000, the UK has operated a policy of dispersal across the UK of asylum applicants who require accommodation, to prevent the London and the South East being overburdened. Asylum applicants have no say in where they are sent to live while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. Instead, to determine where asylum seekers are accommodated, negotiations take place between local authorities, the Home Office, and third-party contractors who are responsible for securing private rental accommodation.

Refugee family reunion

The UK allows an adult granted refugee status or humanitarian protection to be joined in the UK by their spouse or partner, and any of their children who are under 18, if they formed a part of the family unit before the refugee fled their country. However, parents, grandparents, siblings, or children who are 18 or over are not eligible to join under the refugee family reunion route. Nor are unaccompanied minors who have been granted refugee status generally permitted to be joined by their parents. In addition, LGBT+ refugees may have difficulty proving an unmarried partnership if living together with a same-sex partner was [unlawful or unsafe](#) in their country of origin. [Campaign groups](#) have argued for a broader definition of who qualifies as a ‘family member’ for the purposes of refugee family reunion.

Recent policy developments regarding asylum

In March 2021, the UK government published a [policy statement](#) for its *New Plan for Immigration*, which outlined an overhaul of the UK’s “broken” asylum system. A central aim of the policy was to tackle people crossing the English Channel in small boats from France. A major part of this policy was introduced via the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which penalised certain refugees for their method of entering the UK (a policy that was [suspended](#) in July 2023) and introduced tougher criminal sanctions for irregular entry to the UK.

The Illegal Migration Act 2023 introduced even tougher restrictions on asylum seekers who enter the UK without authorisation. The legislation, which became law on 20 July 2023 but has not been brought fully into force, makes several important changes. It determines that most asylum claims from people who entered the country in irregular ways will not be processed. The Act places a duty on the Home Secretary’s responsibility to arrange for their removal to “safe third countries”. If removal is not possible, people could stay in the UK indefinitely without legal status unless they qualify for an exemption. The Act also lets the government detain asylum seekers more easily. Importantly, it removes many protections for victims of modern slavery and trafficking, including their right stay in the UK. For further information, see our commentary [UK policies to deter people from claiming asylum](#).

Under the Nationality and Borders Act and then the Illegal Migration Act, the UK would no longer consider the asylum claims of people who entered the country by irregular means, such as by small boat. But because these claims would not be processed, the government would not be able to remove these asylum seekers to their countries of origin (see our commentary on [Diminishing returns](#)). This is due to a principle called “non-refoulement,” which means that countries cannot send people back to a place where they would be in danger or where their human rights might be violated.

The government announced in April 2022 that it would send asylum seekers who entered the UK irregularly to Rwanda, which it considered a “safe third country”. In November 2023, the UK’s Supreme Court ruled the Rwanda deal unlawful because Rwanda is not a safe country to which asylum seekers can be removed. In response, the Conservative government secured the passage of new legislation stating that Rwanda is a safe country, and agreed a treaty with Rwanda with safeguards against refoulement. It intends to begin removals soon after the general election on 4 July 2024, although the Labour Party says it would scrap the scheme if it were to form the next government. See our commentary on [Rwanda’s policy financial implications](#) and our [Q&A on the Rwanda policy](#).

As part of the suite of policies aimed at reforming the asylum system and reducing its costs, the government also launched in 2021 the “Asylum and Protection Transformation Programme”. This initiative aimed to clear the backlog of asylum applications that had not received a response by the time the Nationality and Borders Act came into effect – the so-called “legacy backlog” (See our briefing on the [Asylum Backlog](#)). It includes several components, such as hiring more caseworkers, streamlining asylum claims, and increasing the supply of cheaper accommodation for asylum seekers.

Refugee resettlement

Refugee resettlement is separate from the asylum process. In the asylum process, people must apply for asylum whilst in the UK. By contrast, it is not possible to apply for refugee resettlement. Instead, refugees are selected by the UN for resettlement, and transferred to the UK with the agreement of the Home Office, where they receive refugee status on arrival. Prior to 2021, the UK operated four resettlement schemes, which have since been merged into the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS). Currently, the UKRS operates along with the Community Sponsorship Scheme and the Mandate Scheme. The key distinction between these schemes is how accommodation and integration support are provided. In the UKRS, local authorities lead in providing integration support to resettled refugees upon arrival. In the Mandate Scheme, selected refugees must have family members settled in the UK who are responsible for supporting and accommodating them. In the Community Sponsorship Scheme, community sponsors are responsible for refugees’ integration and accommodation.

In January 2022, the UK launched the Afghan Citizens Relocation and Resettlement Schemes (ACRS and ARAP). However, in this briefing these are analysed separately from traditional resettlement routes because they do not necessarily operate via UN referrals and focus only on one nationality.

Bespoke humanitarian routes

In addition to asylum and refugee resettlement, since 2021 the UK has launched a series of bespoke humanitarian routes for people of specific nationalities in need of protection. Unlike traditional asylum or resettlement processes, which are usually broad and standardised, bespoke humanitarian routes are tailored to particular groups or circumstances. Each of these routes has different eligibility criteria and grants people different rights and pathways to permanent settlement.

The Hong Kong British National (Overseas) or BN(O) visa was introduced in January 2021 following the Chinese government’s imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong and is directed at British National Overseas citizens and their dependents from Hong Kong. For more detail see our [Q&A: The new Hong Kong British National \(Overseas\) visa](#).

The Afghan Relocations and Resettlement Schemes (ARAP and ACRS) were launched in April 2021 following the withdrawal from Afghanistan of British and US armed forces and the rise of the Taliban. They are directed at people who worked as staff for the UK in Afghanistan, those who fled to the UK under the evacuation in summer 2021, and other vulnerable people who are considered to be at risk in Afghanistan or neighbouring countries. For more detail on the schemes see [Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in the UK](#).

The Ukraine Schemes were introduced in March 2022, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Ukraine Family Scheme allows Ukrainian citizens and their close family members to apply for a visa, free, to come to the UK to join their relatives, who must be either British citizens or have permanent residence. The Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, also known as Homes for Ukraine, allows Ukrainian nationals and their immediate family members to come to the UK if they have a named sponsor. For more detail on the Ukraine schemes, see [Ukrainian Migration to the UK](#).

This briefing focuses on asylum and resettlement schemes. It also includes overall data on bespoke humanitarian routes and how they compare with traditional protection pathways.

Understanding the evidence

In this briefing, references to the EU or EU+ exclude the UK, but include Switzerland and the three additional EEA countries, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway.

Data on foreign-born UK residents' main reason for moving to the UK come from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the largest official household survey in the UK. Only one 'main' reason for migration is recorded, though in practice people may have more than one reason for moving. The data reflect self-reported reasons and will not necessarily match people's legal immigration status.

Data on the number of asylum applicants and grants of asylum-related leave come from administrative databases of the Home Office. In this briefing, where we refer to asylum seekers or asylum applicants (i.e., the number of people who claim asylum), we include both main applicants and dependants. 'Asylum applications' refers to main applicants only. When this briefing discusses "grants", it is typically with respect to grants of "asylum-related protection", which comprises grants of asylum (refugee status) as well as any other grant of permission to stay, such as humanitarian protection or discretionary leave.

To calculate the success rate of asylum claims, we cannot simply divide the number of positive initial decisions in any given year by the total number of applications received that year. This is because most asylum decisions in any given year will relate to claims made in earlier years, and because refused claims can be appealed. Therefore, to examine the success rate of asylum claims, this briefing analyses Home Office data on the 'final outcomes' of applications. These data provide the outcomes of a 'cohort' of applications (i.e., all those submitted in the same year), taking into account the results of appeals to the First-tier Tribunal (though not higher courts). In recognising that initial refusals can be overturned on appeal, these data provide a better indication of success rates than data on initial decisions. These estimates of asylum claim success rates exclude withdrawn applications and those that are still pending, because these applications have not received a decision.

In this briefing, we also provide data on people who were offered bespoke humanitarian routes to the UK. These include those with Ukraine Family Scheme and Homes for Ukraine visas, BN(O) status holders and Afghan nationals who have been resettled through the ARAP and ACRS routes. Information on Afghan nationals resettled under these special schemes has been excluded from the overall resettlement data and analysed separately.

The only available data on the location of asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim is for those who are receiving government support. There are three types of this support. 'Section 4' support is for applicants whose claims have been finally refused but are destitute and cannot leave the UK. 'Section 95' support is for asylum seekers who have an asylum claim or appeal outstanding, and failed asylum seekers who had children in their household when their appeal rights were exhausted. Finally, 'Section 98' support is a type of temporary support for asylum seekers who have applied for Section 95 support and are awaiting a decision on that application.

Section 95 support includes the provision of accommodation, money for subsistence, or both. These data are broken down by region and local authority. The data on asylum seekers' location presented in this briefing include all those on Section 4, Section 95 or Section 98 support and not just those in dispersed accommodation. This support is given only to asylum seekers who are destitute and so these data may not reflect the location of *all* asylum seekers. Local authority data for those in receipt of Sections 4, 95, and 98 support are based on the registered address of the asylum seeker, which may not be the location at which the individual regularly resides.

For resettled refugees, location data are provided for those who arrived between 1 January 2014 and 31 December 2023 and refer to people's initial receiving local authority, which they may later leave. The location of Ukrainian and Afghan nationals offered a humanitarian visa is based on data on arrivals under the Homes for Ukraine and ACRS/ARAP schemes, respectively. Currently, there is no available data on the place of residence of BN(O) visa holders.

People who originally came to the UK to seek asylum made up an estimated 4% of the UK's foreign-born population in 2022 and 0.6% of the UK's total resident population

An estimated 387,000 foreign-born people living in the UK in 2022 said they originally came to the UK to seek asylum, according to Migration Observatory analysis of the Annual Population Survey. This made up 4% of the UK's 10 million foreign-born population in 2022, and 0.6% of the UK's total 2022 resident population of around 67 million. Of these, 54% had lived in the UK for sixteen years or more (Figure 1).

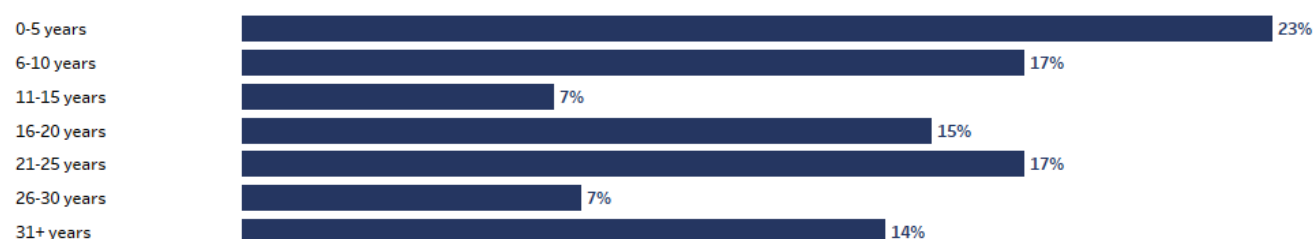
The profile of people seeking asylum in the UK differs depending on how long they have been in the country. Men constitute a larger percentage of those who arrived recently and have been living in the UK for less than six years, as opposed to those who have been in the country for 20 years or more. Asylum seekers who arrived recently are generally older at the time of their arrival compared to those who arrived earlier (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Characteristics of people who initially came to the UK to seek asylum, by length of residence in the UK

Estimates of the foreign-born population as at 2022

Length of Residence



Mean age at arrival



Proportion of women



Mean Age at Arrival

Female Share

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of the Labour Force Survey, 2022 (weighted average of four quarters).

Note: These data refer to participants in the survey who said that their main reason for migrating was to seek asylum, with only one main reason recorded.



As explained in 'Understanding the Evidence' above, these data are self-reported. This means that people arriving as resettled refugees or on bespoke humanitarian routes, as well as those lodging an asylum claim in the UK, may have given "seeking asylum" as their main reason for coming to the UK.

In 2023, asylum accounted for 7% of immigration to the UK, compared with 4% who arrived on bespoke humanitarian schemes

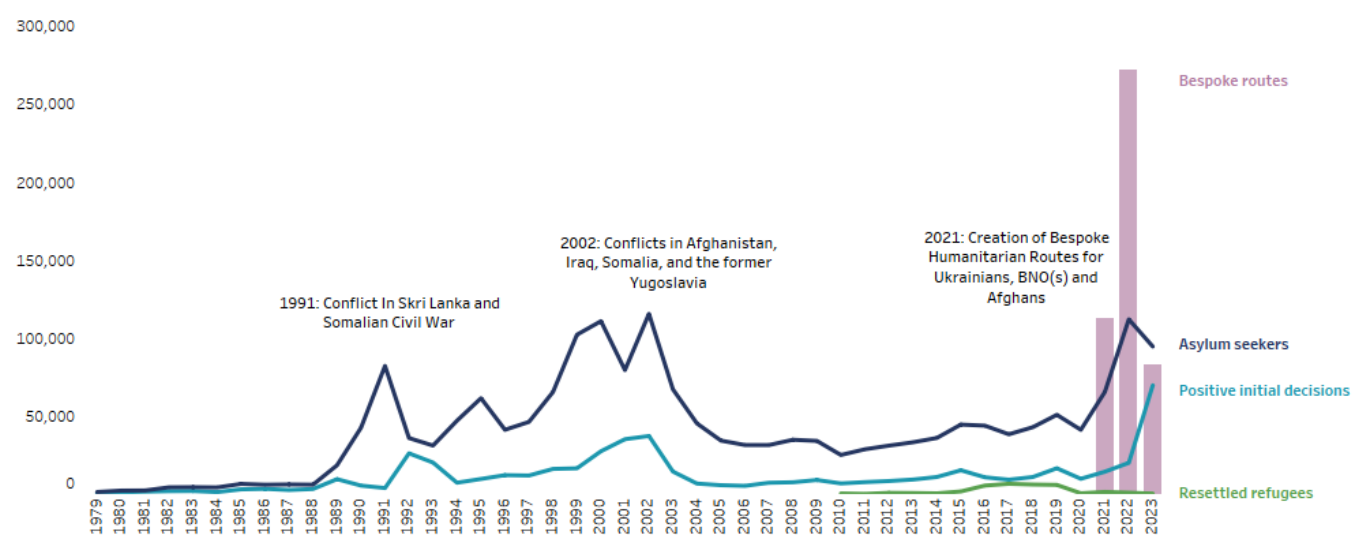
In 2023, long-term international migration to the UK was estimated to be around [1.2 million](#). Of these, 81,000 came to claim asylum, which is equivalent to around 7% of all immigrants in that year.

Changes over time in the number of people claiming asylum in the UK [are driven](#) in large part by geopolitical events, since asylum seekers come mainly from countries with political and military conflicts. For example, the spike in people who came to the UK to seek asylum from 1998 to 2002 were mainly nationals of Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and the former Yugoslavia, which were then sites of war (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Number of people who claimed asylum, positive initial decisions, refugees resettled, and people offered bespoke humanitarian routes to the UK, 1979 to 2023

Main applicants and dependants; positive decisions are grants of asylum or other permission to stay



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics: for asylum seekers and positive initial decisions, 1979–2000: Table as_02 (June 2019), and for 2001–2022, Table Asy_D02 (December 2023). For resettled refugees (including the Afghan resettlement scheme): Table Asy_D02 (December 2023). For Ukrainian and BNO Schemes: Table Vis_D01 (December 2023). For BNO visas issued within the UK: Table Ex_D01 (December 2023).

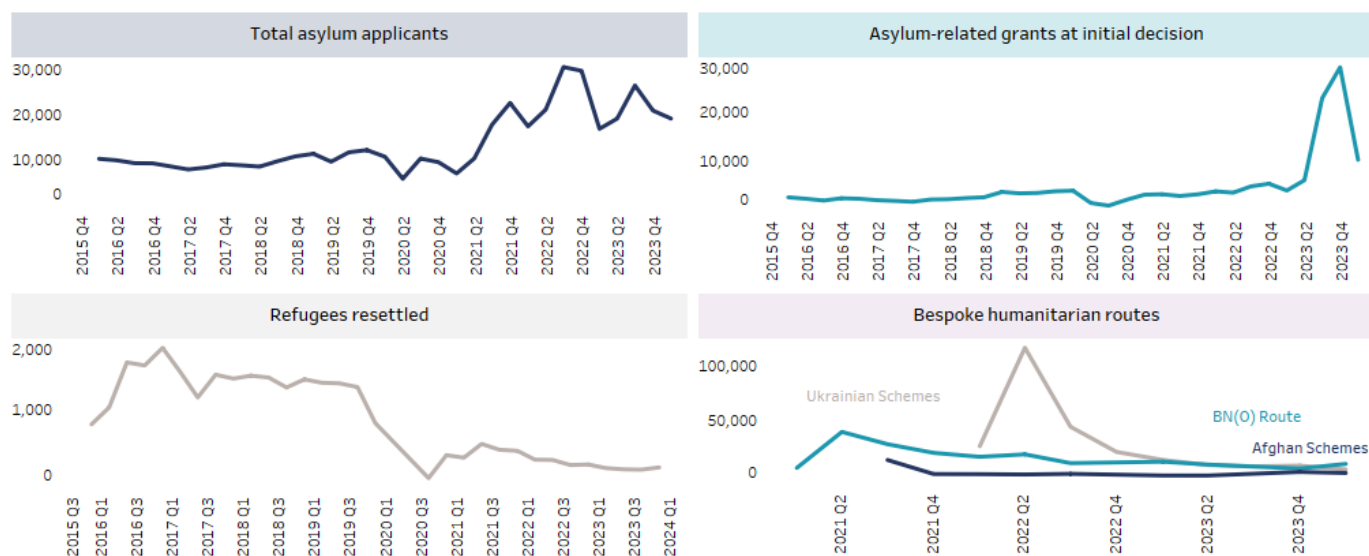
Note: Beneficiaries of the Afghan resettlement schemes (ARAP and ACRS) have been included under the bespoke humanitarian routes figure and excluded from the resettlement data. 'Other leave' comprises grants of humanitarian protection, discretionary leave, leave under family or private life rules, UASC leave, leave outside the rules, Calais leave, and exceptional leave to remain. Grants are at initial decision; the number of people granted some form of asylum-related leave will be higher if appeals are taken into account. Resettlement data are for refugees resettled under the VPRS, VCRS, Gateway Protection Programme and Mandate Scheme.



In 2021 and 2022, the UK introduced a series of bespoke humanitarian schemes targeted at specific nationalities: Ukrainians, Afghans and BN(O)s from Hong Kong (see 'Understanding the Policy' above). In 2022, the number of beneficiaries of the schemes far surpassed the number of resettled refugees and people granted asylum in any year since 1979. Although visa issuances under these programmes fell significantly in 2023, they still exceeded the number of resettled refugees and in-country asylum grants. Humanitarian schemes accounted for around 4% of immigration to the UK in 2023, according to the [Office for National Statistics](#).

Figure 3

UK refugee resettlement, asylum, and humanitarian routes per quarter, Q1 2016 to Q1 2024



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics. For asylum seekers and positive initial decisions: Table Asy_D02 (March 2024). For resettled refugees (including the Afghan resettlement scheme): Table Asy_D02 (March 2024). For Ukrainian and BNO Schemes: Table Vis_D01 (March 2024). For BNO visas issued from within the UK: Table Ex_D01 (March 2024).

Note: Asylum applicants and grants are for main applicants and dependants. Asylum-related grants comprises grants of asylum or other leave at initial decision and therefore do not take into account the results of appeals, which increase the number of grants. Data for bespoke humanitarian routes are for visas issued rather than arrivals.



In 2023, the top five most common countries of nationality of people who applied for asylum from within the UK were Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh

Table 1 shows the fifteen most common countries of nationality of people (main applicants and dependants) who applied for asylum in the UK in 2023.

The share of applications that ultimately result in a grant of asylum or other permission to stay varies significantly by nationality. For example, looking at applications received across the three-year period 2019 to 2021, the share of Syrian and Eritrean nationals who had received a grant of asylum or other permission by September 2023 was 91% (after appeal), while for Indian nationals, it was 6% (Table 1).

Table 1

Nationality of people seeking asylum in the UK: the top 15 most common in 2023

Country	Asylum seekers in 2023	% of people seeking asylum in 2023	Initial decision grant rate in 2023	% of 2019-21 applicants ultimately granted asylum or other leave	Trend, 2001-2023
Afghanistan	9,307	11%	99%	79%	
Iran	7,397	9%	86%	77%	
Pakistan	5,273	6%	55%	53%	
India	5,253	6%	9%	6%	
Bangladesh	4,258	5%	29%	34%	
Turkey	4,255	5%	88%	83%	
Iraq	3,985	5%	42%	49%	
Eritrea	3,870	5%	99%	91%	
Albania	3,898	5%	13%	32%	
Syria	3,772	4%	99%	91%	
Sudan	3,453	4%	98%	77%	
Vietnam	2,304	3%	54%	78%	
Brazil	1,857	2%	7%	11%	
China	1,378	2%	18%	24%	

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D01 (December 2023); Table Asy_D02 (December 2023); and Table Asy_D04 (December 2023)

Note: 'Asylum seekers' comprises main applicants and dependants. 'Initial decision grant rate' is for main applicants only. 'Share ultimately granted asylum or other leave' is the share of applications (main applicants) received in 2019 to 2021 inclusive that had resulted in a grant of asylum or other leave as of December 2023, taking into account appeals to the First-tier Tribunal but not higher courts, and excluding applications that were withdrawn or are pending.



The success rate of asylum applications at initial decision increased sharply from 2018 to 2022 before falling in 2023

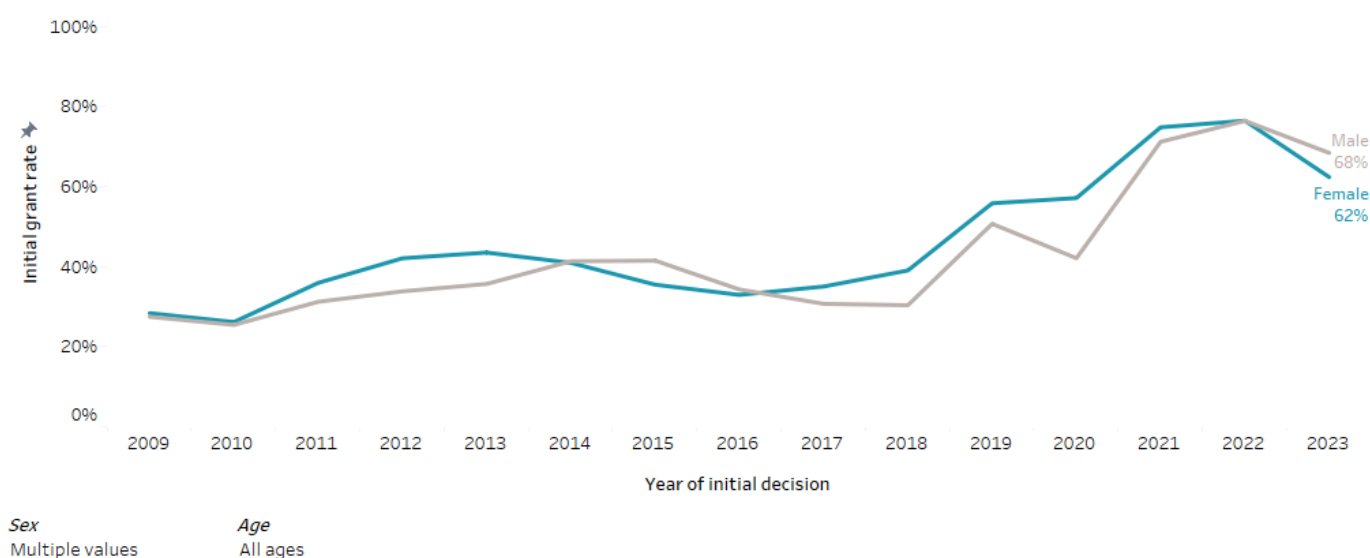
In 2022, the share of asylum applications receiving a grant at initial decision rose to a record high of 76%, which is much higher than in previous years. In 2018, the initial decision grant rate was 33% (Figure 4). Many factors could have driven the change. One is a change in the composition of applicants. For example, in recent years, there has been an increase in nationalities whose asylum application success rate is higher than the average, such as Iranians, Syrians and Eritreans (Table 1).

However, in 2023, the percentage of successful applications at the initial decision stage dropped to 67% (Figure 4). This decline in overall success rates may be linked to [policy changes](#) and changes in the composition of applicants. In 2023, 21% of all refusals were of Albanian nationals who historically have had low asylum success rates in the UK, but whose applications peaked in 2022 (Table 2).

Figure 4

Share of asylum seekers receiving a grant of asylum-related permission to stay *at initial decision*, per year, by age and sex, 2009 to 2023

Main applicants only



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D02 (December 2023)

Notes: 'All ages' includes a small number of people of "Unknown" age, and the sex category 'All' includes people of 'Unknown sex'.



In 2023, asylum success rates at initial decision were very similar among men and women

Data from 2023 show that asylum success rates at initial decision were very similar among men and women in all age groups except the over-70s (Figure 4). For example, 70% of men aged 18–29 were granted asylum or another legal status, compared to 68% of women aged 18–29.

An important factor that increases the share of female refugees in the UK is that following grants of asylum, many young male refugees will go on to be joined by their female partners through refugee family reunion. From 2012 to 2023, 81% of adults receiving refugee family reunion visas were women. As a result, after accounting for family reunion, the gender balance of those granted protection becomes more even over time. Taken together, women made up 36% of adults granted asylum-related status or refugee family reunion between 2012 and 2023 (Table 2). Note that these figures exclude asylum applicants who are initially refused but are successful on appeal, as the immigration statistics do not include a gender breakdown for this group.

Table 2

Adult asylum grants, resettlement and refugee family reunion by sex, 2012-2023, annual average

	Men	Women	% Men
Successful asylum applicants (initial decision only)	8,077	2,716	75%
Refugee family reunion visas granted	469	2,009	19%
Successful asylum applicants (initial decision) + refugee family reunion	8,546	4,725	64%
Resettled refugees	633	721	47%

Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office immigration statistics, Table Asy_D02 (December 2023) and Fam_D01 (December 2023). Note: Excludes people under age 18. Successful asylum applications are those who receive a grant of asylum or other permission to stay resulting from an asylum application. Grants of asylum include main applicants and dependants.



Taking appeals into account, 66% of asylum applications submitted in 2018 to 2020 inclusive are estimated to have received a grant of asylum-related protection by June 2022 – up from 56% at initial decision

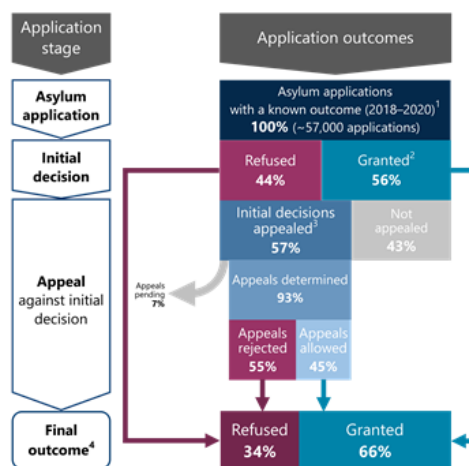
All initial decisions by the Home Office on asylum claims can be appealed against, which ultimately increases the share of successful claims. Of all applications (main applicants) received in the three-year period from 2018 to 2020 with a known outcome as of June 2022 (this excludes withdrawn and pending applications), 56% resulted in a grant of asylum or other permission to stay at initial decision.

Over this period, 57% of initial decisions were appealed. Most appeals are against refusals, but some appeals are against positive decisions to seek a [stronger form](#) of permission to stay, such as refugee status rather than humanitarian protection. Of these appeals with a known outcome (excluding pending and withdrawn appeals), 45% were successful. This increased the grant rate from 56% at initial Home Office decision to 66% after appeal to the First-tier tribunal (Figure 5).

Figure 5

What share of asylum applications are ultimately successful?

Main applicants, excluding dependants; for applications submitted in 2018 to 2020 inclusive with a known outcome as at June 2022, excluding withdrawn applications



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Outcome analysis of asylum applications, Asy_D04.

Note: (1) Because the estimated grant rates are based on cases with a known outcome only, they will change with time as more cases reach initial decision and a final outcome after appeal. (2) 'Granted' means granted asylum or another form of leave. Rates are estimates because interpretation is required in a small number of cases, which is made by Home Office computer code. (3) Appeals against initial decisions include appeals against positive initial decisions except those granting full refugee status (i.e., grants of asylum). Although most appeals are against rejections, a small number are against positive decisions (except grants of asylum), to seek a stronger form of leave. (4) 'Final outcome' takes into account appeals to the First-tier Tribunal, but not higher courts.



For applications received between 2011 to 2018 with known outcomes as of June 2022, successful appeals increased success rates by between 13 and 21 percentage points each year (Figure 6). Since 2019, the gap between initial grant rates and grant rates after appeal has significantly narrowed. This is because initial grant rates were already high and there were fewer appeals being submitted.

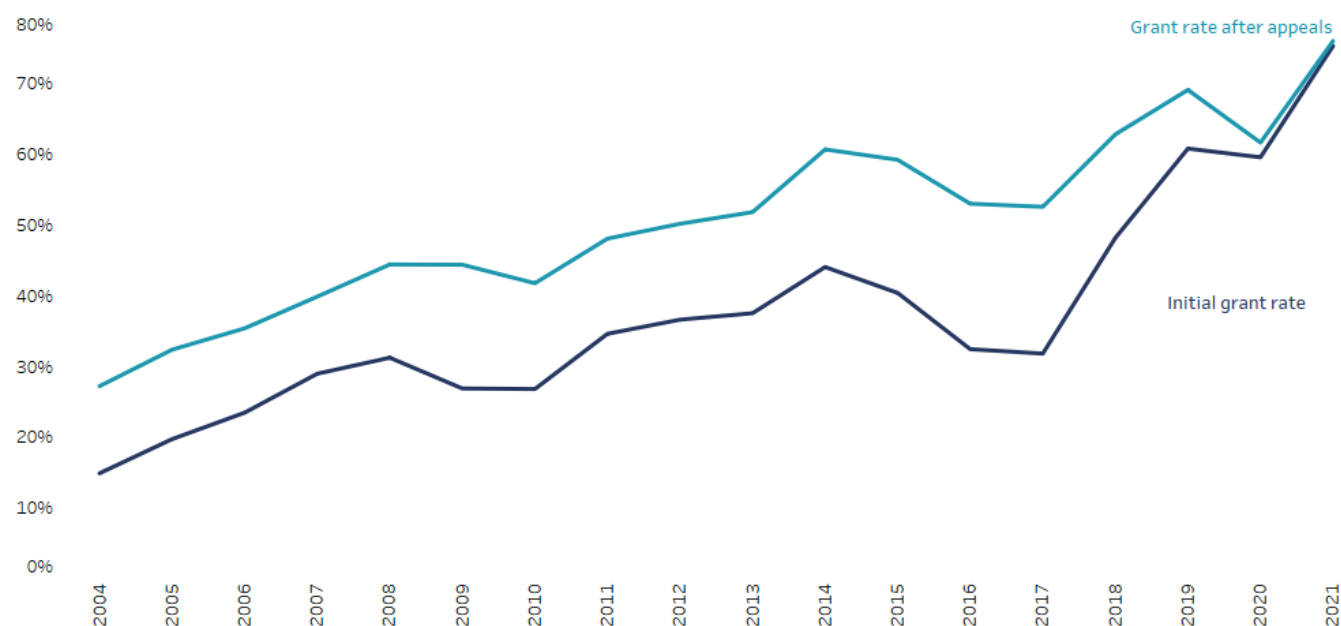
Changes in grant rates following appeals are, in part, the result of changes in the success rate of appeals. The share of concluded appeals that were successful increased from a low of 19% in 2004 to a high of 49% in 2023.¹

1. Migration observatory analysis of [Home Office, Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D06 December 2023](#)

Figure 6

How do appeals against initial decisions on asylum applications affect grant rates?

Main applicants; for applications received from 2004 to 2021 inclusive, as at June 2022



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Outcome analysis of asylum applications, Asy_D04 (June 2022)

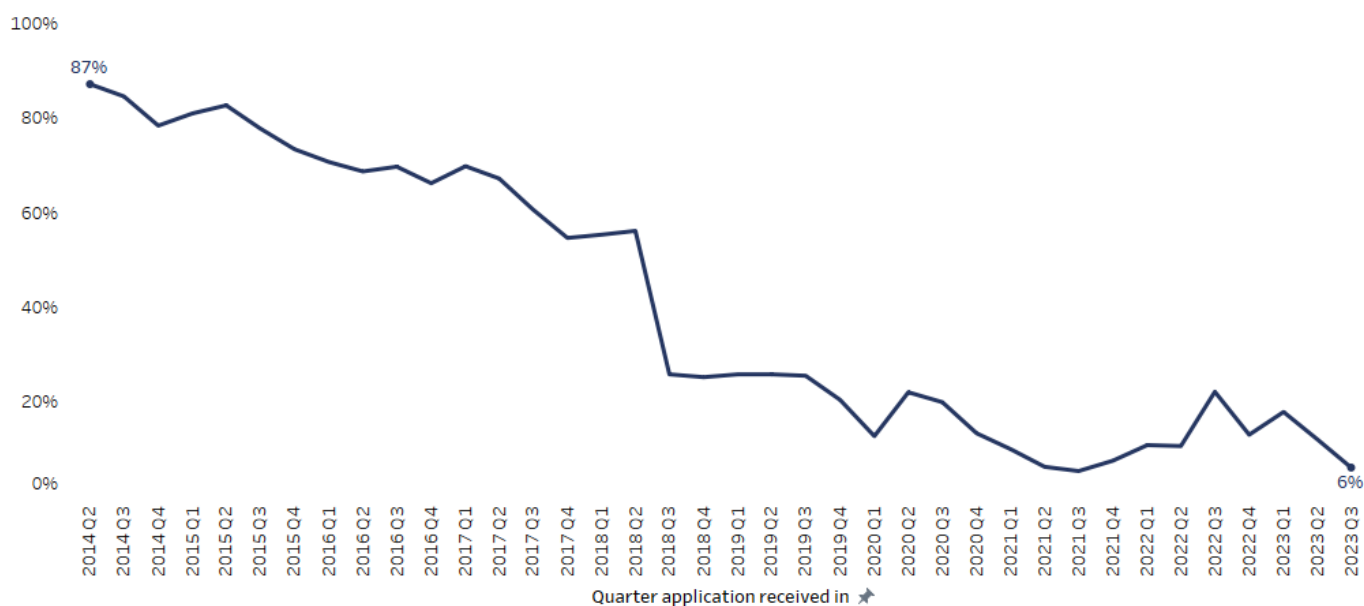
Note: Excludes withdrawn applications and those awaiting an outcome as of June 2022. A grant refers to a grant of asylum or other form of leave, such as humanitarian protection or discretionary leave.

**The share of asylum applications that received an initial decision within six months fell from 87% in Q2 2014 to 6% in Q3 2023**

The time it takes for asylum seekers to receive an initial decision on their application has increased significantly in recent years. In Q2 2014, 87% of applications received an initial decision within six months, compared to 6% in Q3 2023.

Figure 7

Share of asylum applications receiving an initial decision within six months, UK, Q2 2014 to Q3 2023
Adult main applicants



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of UK Visas and Immigration Transparency data, Immigration & Protection data, Asy_01 (March 2024).



Between 2018 and 2022 the UK's asylum backlog increased sharply from 27,000 to 132,000 applications. It fell by 28% in 2023 following several government measures to process applications faster

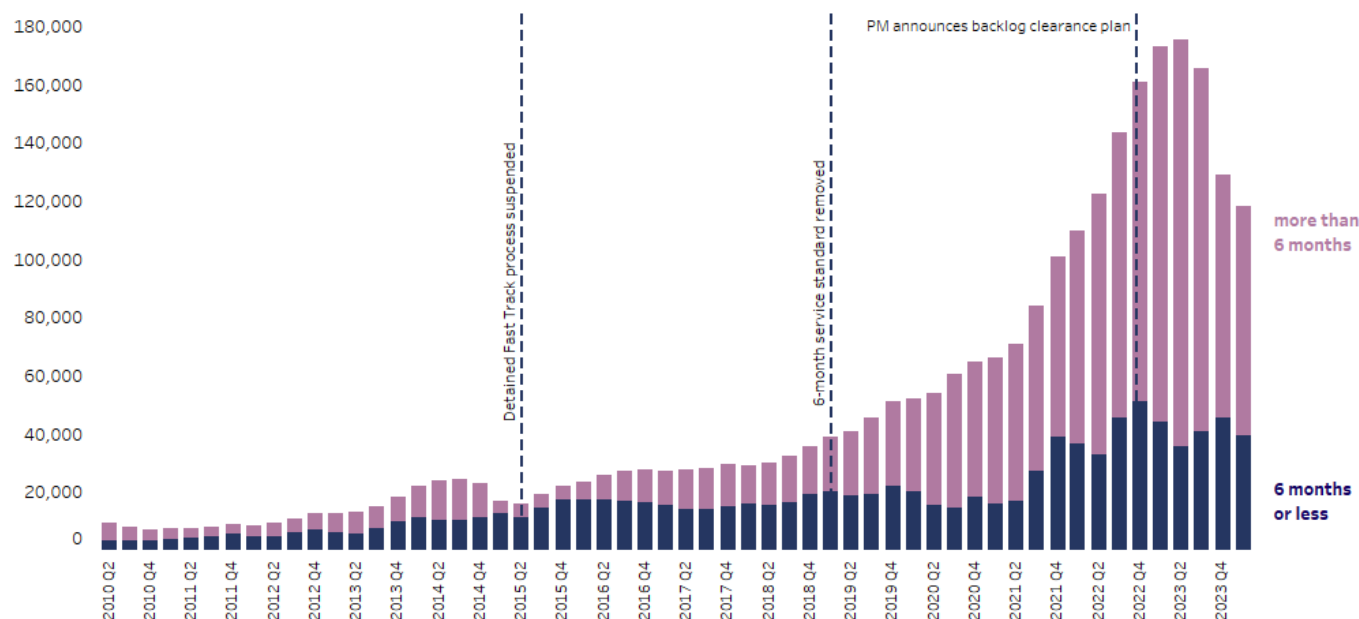
The asylum backlog has increased substantially in recent years, due to an increase in applications, and applications taking longer to process. On 30 June 2023, around 175,500 people were awaiting an *initial decision* on their asylum claim (including main applicants and dependants) – a more than eighteen-fold increase on the number awaiting an initial decision on 30 June 2010 (Figure 8). Of the 175,500 on people awaiting an initial decision from the Home Office on June 2023, 80% had been waiting for more than six months.

Recent data show a change in this trend. In the first quarter of 2024, the number of people waiting for a decision decreased by 31% compared to the same quarter of 2023. This reduction follows the government's recent efforts to clear the legacy backlog (see the Understanding the Policy section and our briefing on [The UK's Asylum Backlog](#)).

Figure 8

Number of people awaiting an initial decision on their asylum claim, Q2 2010 to Q1 2024

Main applicants and dependants; counts taken on the last day of each quarter



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Asylum applications awaiting a decision, Table Asy_D03 (March 2024)

Note: Includes cases lodged since 1 April 2006. Last day in each quarter = 31 March, 30 June, 30 September, 31 December.



Research shows that longer asylum waiting times have negative impacts on [long-term employment](#) outcomes for asylum seekers, and that being unable to work while waiting for a decision is also likely to hinder [long-term integration](#).

The distribution of asylum seekers and resettled refugees is uneven across the UK

Asylum seekers are unevenly distributed across the UK. The majority are concentrated in London, the North West of England and West Midlands. Ten local authorities host 22% of this population (Figure 9). This distribution is partly influenced by dispersal policies, which incentivise contractors to house people in places where accommodation is cheaper.

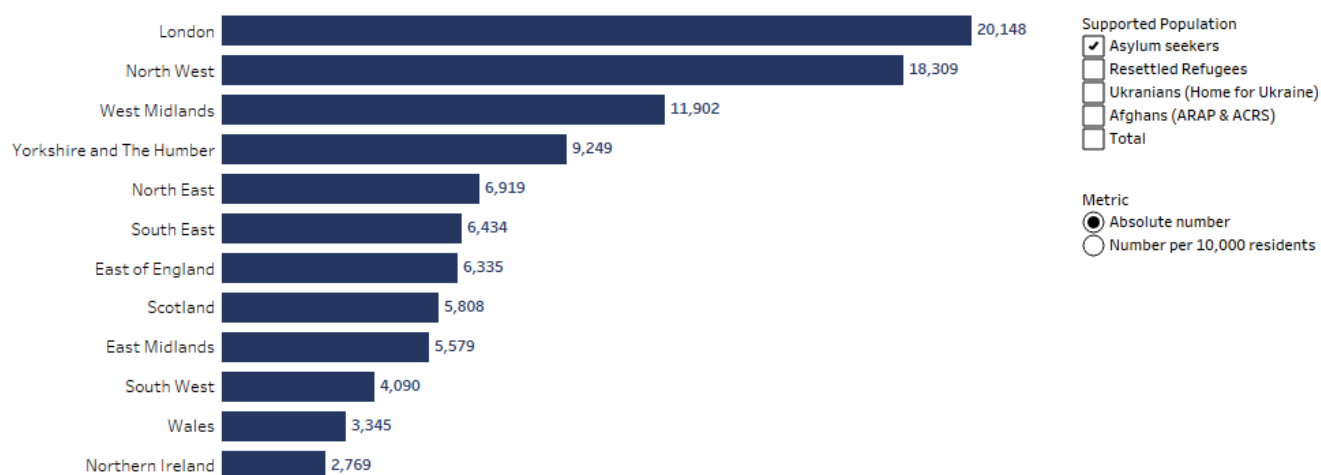
The distribution of asylum seekers contrasts with that of people who came under the Ukraine schemes, who are more highly dispersed across the UK. The ten authorities with the highest number of Ukrainian nationals on the Home for Ukraine Schemes host only 11% of this population. This is because the scheme works around individual families' availability to support a Ukrainian citizen. The individual local authorities hosting the highest number of Ukrainian nationals are located in the South West and South East regions of England: Buckinghamshire, Somerset, and Barnet. Scotland hosts more of this population than any other region of the UK (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Where do asylum seekers, resettled refugees, Afghans and Ukrainians live?

Absolute numbers and per 10,000 resident population, by population of interest, and by local authority (map) and UK region (chart), as at 31 March 2024

Select Chart
Regional Chart



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Regional and Local authority data - Immigration groups (Table Reg_01) and Resettlement by Local Authority (Table Res_D01), Year ending March 2024.

Notes: Asylum seekers refer to main applicants and dependants on either Section 98, Section 95 or Section 4. Afghan nationals refer to people arriving through ARAP or ACRS. Ukrainian nationals refer to people under the Home for Ukraine visa schemes. The data include refugees who were resettled from 2014 to 2024 and refer to their initial place of residence, from which they may have since left.



The use of contingency accommodation to house asylum seekers has increased substantially since the pandemic

Destitute asylum seekers are provided with different types of accommodation, including initial, dispersed, and contingency accommodation. Dispersed accommodation refers to self-contained housing where nuclear families are allowed to stay together. Initial accommodation is usually a hostel-type environment, intended to be used as a first solution before transfer to dispersed accommodation.

Contingency accommodation is provided by the Home Office to host asylum seekers who are not able to move to dispersed accommodation within three to four weeks. It includes the use of hotels. This solution has become increasingly common since the pandemic. In the first quarter of 2020, only 5% of supported asylum seekers were housed in contingency, initial or other non-dispersed accommodation. By the first quarter of 2024, 41% were in this type of housing (Figure 10). Among those in contingency, initial, and other non-dispersed accommodation as of March 2024, the majority (68%) were in hotels.²

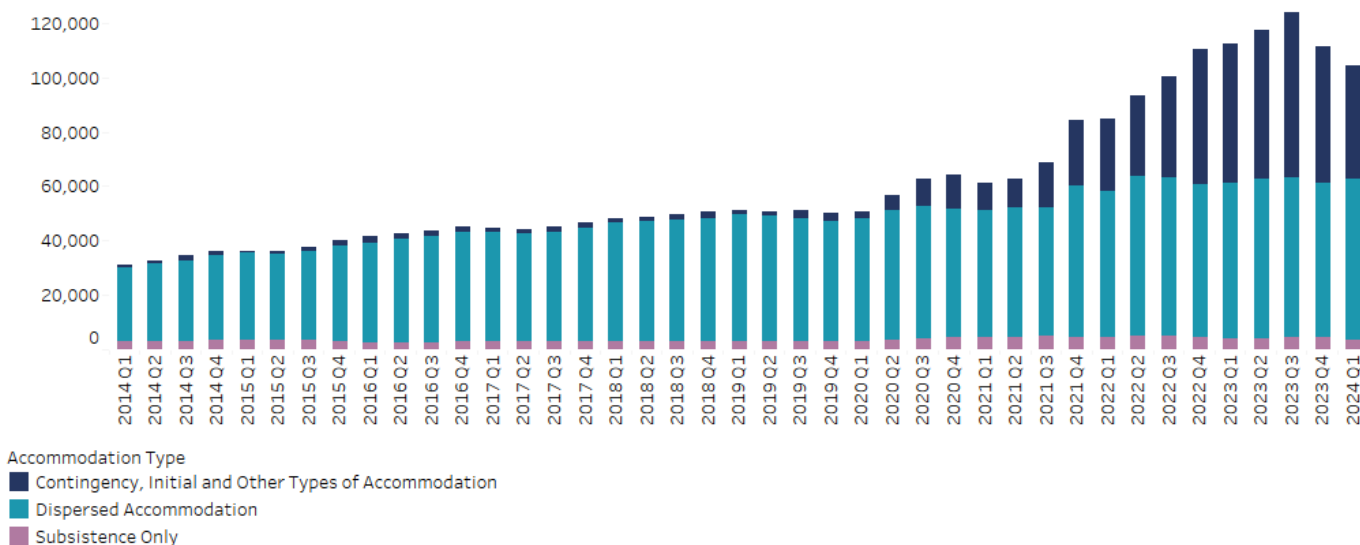
As part of the Asylum and Protection Transformation Programme, and as a means to reduce the cost of the asylum system, the Home Office has enforced more room-sharing in hotels. There have been concerns raised about the [safety of room-sharing](#) for vulnerable asylum seekers. In addition, the Conservative government [pledged](#) that it would start housing more people in repurposed accommodation, such as unused military sites. In the first quarter of 2024, only 3% of all places used to house asylum seekers consisted of 'Other' types of contingency accommodation.³

2. Migration observatory analysis of [Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D11 December 2023](#)

3. Migration observatory analysis of [Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D11 December 2023](#)

Figure 10**Number of asylum seekers in receipt of support, by type of support, date, and section, Q2 2014 to Q1 2024**

Last day of each quarter



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D11 (March 2024)

Note: Before 2022 Q4, the available Home Office data does not provide a breakdown of the type of accommodation where asylum seekers were hosted. In this chart, the categories "Contingency Accommodation - Hotel", "Contingency Accommodation - Other", "Initial Accommodation", and "Other Accommodation" have been aggregated under the category "Contingency, initial, and other Accommodation" from Q4 2022. Before this date, this corresponds to the Home Office category "N/A - Section 98 (pre-2023)". Last day of quarter: Q1=31 March, Q2=30 June, Q3=30 September, Q4= 31 December.

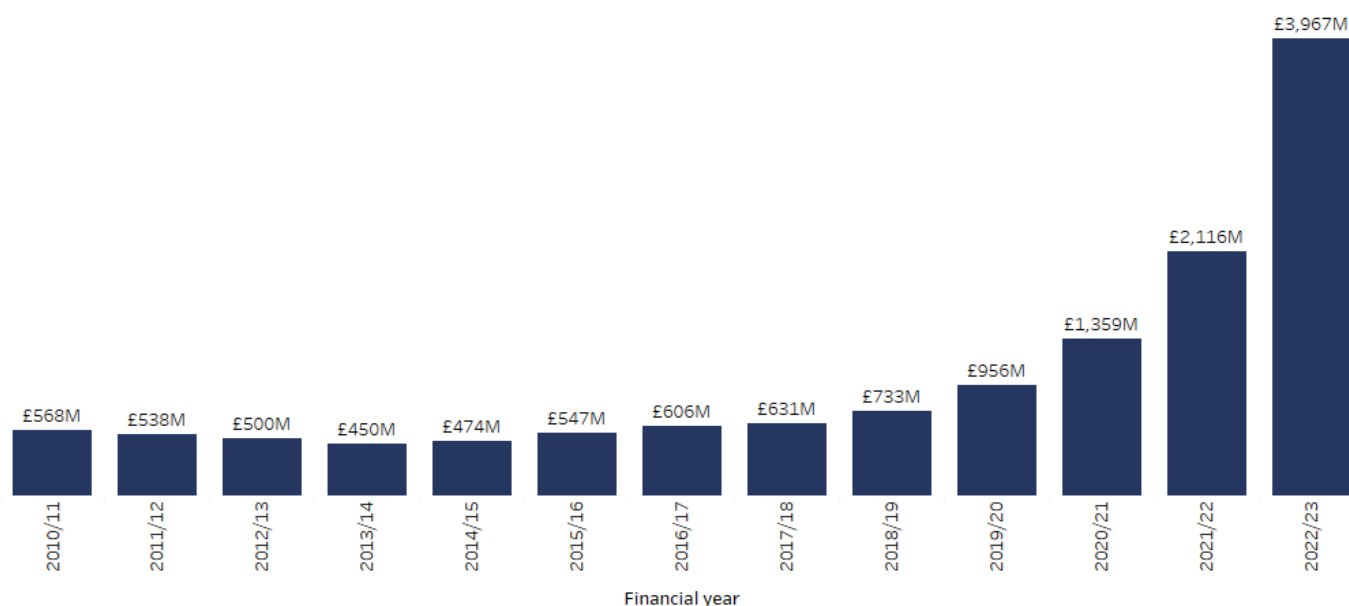
**The financial cost of operating the UK's asylum system reached around £4bn in the financial year 2022/23**

The financial cost of the UK's asylum system has increased substantially in recent years: from £538 million in the financial year 2011/12 to £3,967 million ten years later in 2022/23 (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Annual financial cost (£) of the UK's asylum system, 2010/11 to 2022/23

Financial years



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration and Protection Transparency Data, Table Asy_04, Year ending December 2023

Notes: Costs include those associated with deciding a case (interviews, asylum casework, issuing a decision); managing any appeals; accommodation and asylum support payments; costs of detention; enforcement costs, including escorting and assisting voluntary returns; and the cost of the Home Office's relevant department staff and buildings.

**Despite nominal increases, in real terms the asylum support payment level in 2023 was 29% lower than in 2000**

Under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, destitute asylum seekers are entitled to free accommodation and a weekly cash allowance to cover their essential living needs. The Home Office regularly reviews the level of the weekly cash allowance and has changed it 13 times since 2000 (Figure 12: Nominal payment).

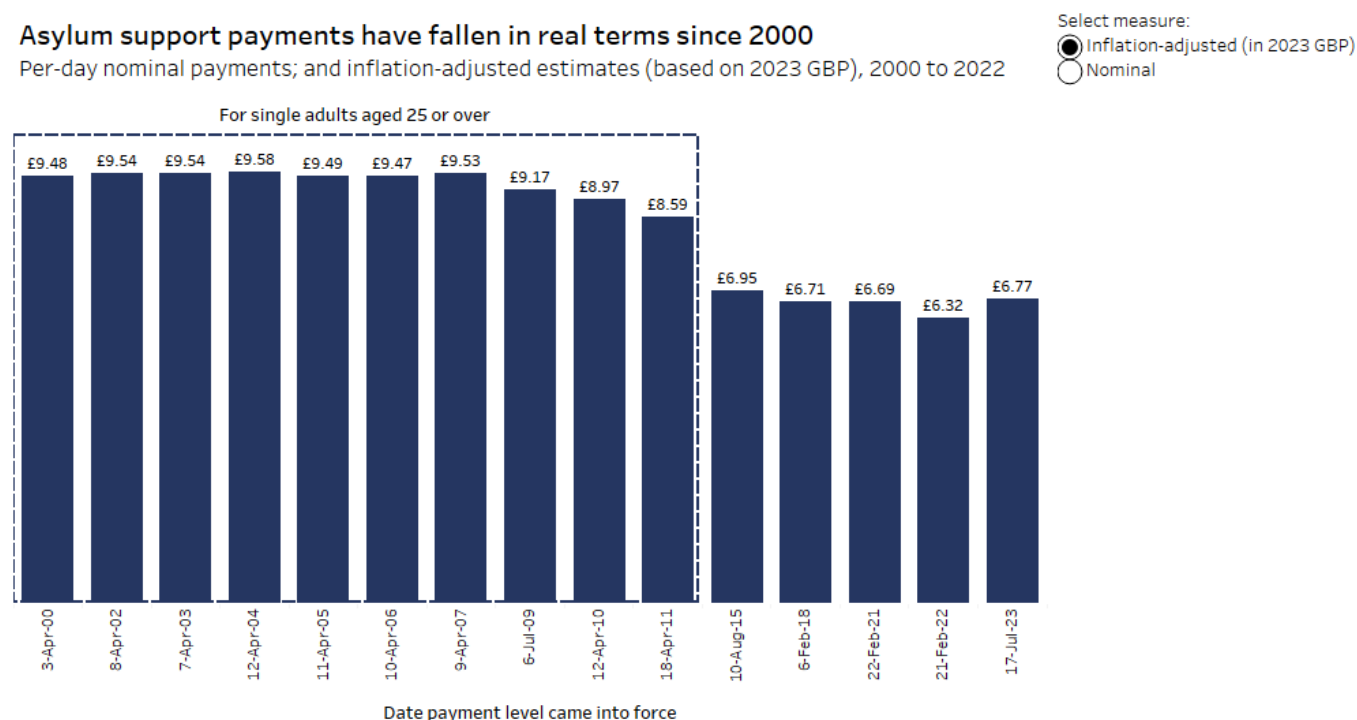
When introduced in 2000, asylum seekers were entitled to one of a variety of different payments, depending on their age and whether they were a lone parent or part of a couple. In 2015, the government replaced these different payments by a single payment level for all destitute asylum seekers.

Increases in support payments have not kept up with inflation. Since the single asylum support payment was introduced in 2015, the level of the payment has fallen in real terms (Figure 12: Inflation-adjusted). In real terms, the payment level in 2023 of £6.77 per day was 29% lower than in 2000. The daily rate paid to a single adult in 2000, £5.22, bought goods and services that would today cost £9.

Figure 12

Asylum support payments have fallen in real terms since 2000

Per-day nominal payments; and inflation-adjusted estimates (based on 2023 GBP), 2000 to 2022



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of legislation.gov.uk: The Asylum Support Regulations 2000 and subsequent legislation amending it, up to The Asylum Support (Amendment) Regulations 2022.

Notes: Inflation-adjusted estimates were calculated using the Bank of England Inflation Calculator. Inflation-adjusted estimates are given in 2023 GBP. From 3 Apr 2000 to 9 August 2015, payment levels are given for a single person aged 25 or over (reflecting the most common category of asylum seeker); from 10 August 2015 onwards, there was only one type of asylum support payment.



Compared against EU countries, the UK ranked 5th for number of asylum claims received in 2023, but 20th if adjusted for population size

In 2023, the UK received around 84,000 in-country asylum applicants, the fifth highest when compared with the EU+ (the EU-27 plus Switzerland and the three EEA countries, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway). When adjusted by population size, it received the 20th highest number of applications: 12.5 per 10,000 residents.

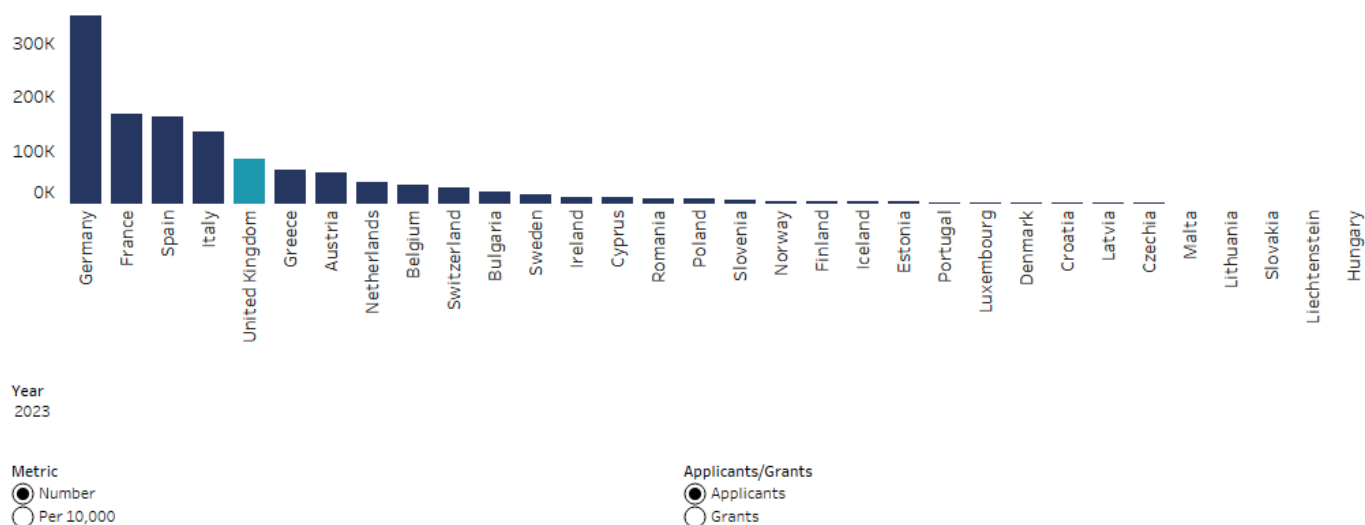
In the same year, the UK granted asylum or another form of legal status to around 62,000 people (at initial decision, excluding appeals), placing it second in the league table. Germany ranks first on both measures, receiving around 351,000 asylum applicants in 2023, and granting asylum-related protection to around 135,000 people at initial decision that year (Figure 13).

Adjusted for population size, the UK ranks 10th when compared with the EU+, having granted protection in 2023 to nine asylum seekers per 10,000 of its resident population.

Figure 13

Number of asylum applicants and grants of asylum: the UK and the EU+

Per year, 2012 to 2023; absolute numbers and per 10,000 population; main applicants and dependants, *does not include resettled refugees*



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D02 (December 2023) for UK data; and Eurostat Statistics, 'Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex (migr_asyappctza)' (applications) and 'First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex (migr_asydcfsta)' (positive decisions), Date of data retrieval: 9 April 2024, for EU countries. Population estimates are from Eurostat, demo_pjan, as at 1 January in each year, except for the UK for 2021 to 2023, which uses ONS mid-year estimates.

Note: 'Grants' includes all people receiving a positive grant, which includes a grant of refugee status, authorisation to stay for humanitarian reasons, or any other kind of permission to stay, at initial decision, excluding the results of appeals. The success rate of applications in any year cannot be calculated by dividing the number of grants by the number of applications, because grants will be made with respect to applications made in previous years.

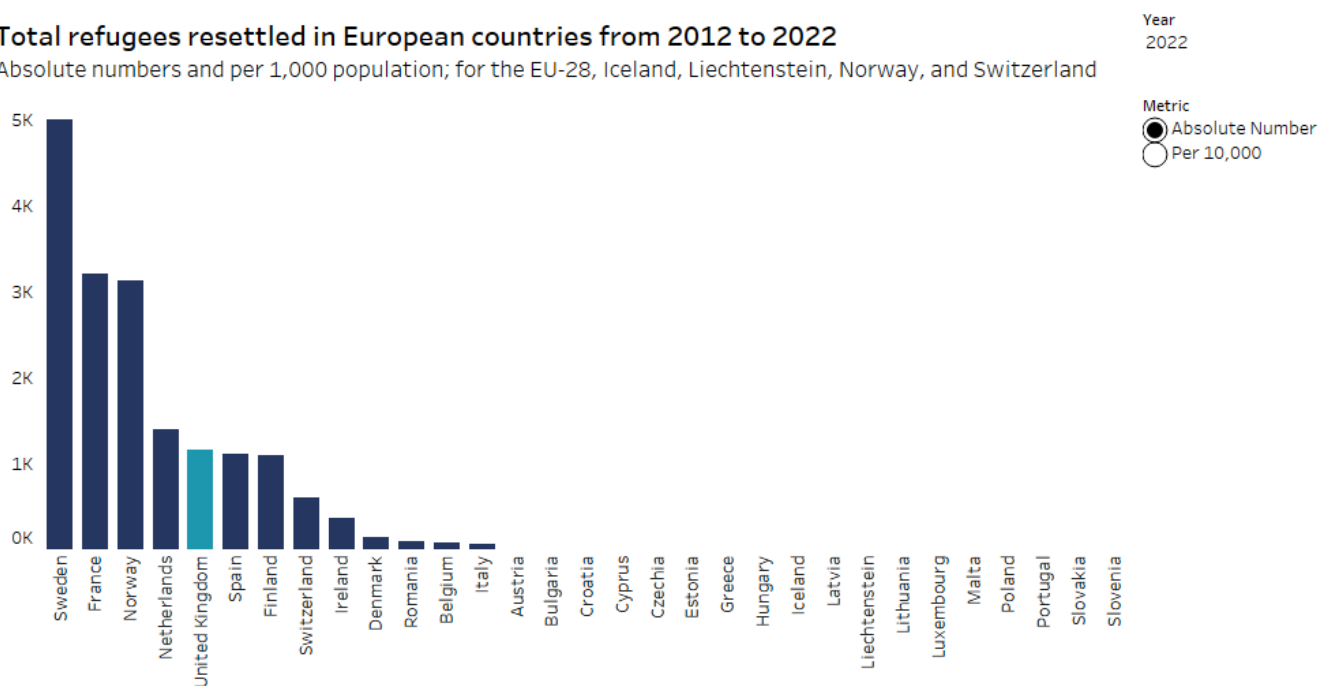


These figures do not include people given protection under refugee resettlement programmes. Under such programmes, the UK resettled around 31,000 refugees from 2012 to 2022, excluding the Afghan resettlement schemes and Ukraine/Hong Kong visa programmes. While the UK ranked first in the league table in 2019 compared to the EU+, it fell to 6th place in 2022 (Figure 14). During that year, the UK resettled 1,163 people, whereas Sweden, ranking first in the measure, resettled 5,000 people. When adjusting for population size, the UK ranks 10th on the list. As data on resettlement for 2023 is not yet available for most EU countries, this comparison is provided for 2022.

Figure 14

Total refugees resettled in European countries from 2012 to 2022

Absolute numbers and per 1,000 population; for the EU-28, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D02 (June 2023) for UK data; and Eurostat, 'Resettled persons by age, sex and citizenship (migr_asyresa)'. Population estimates are from Eurostat, demo_pjan, date of data retrieval: 19 October 2023, for EU countries. Population estimates are from Eurostat, demo_pjan, as at 1 January in each year, except for the UK for 2021 and 2022, which uses ONS mid-year 2021 and 2022 estimates.

Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest five. Country population estimates are as at 1 January in each year. The EU+ comprises the EU countries, Switzerland, and the three EEA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. UK resettlement data excludes refugees resettled under the Afghan Resettlement Schemes.

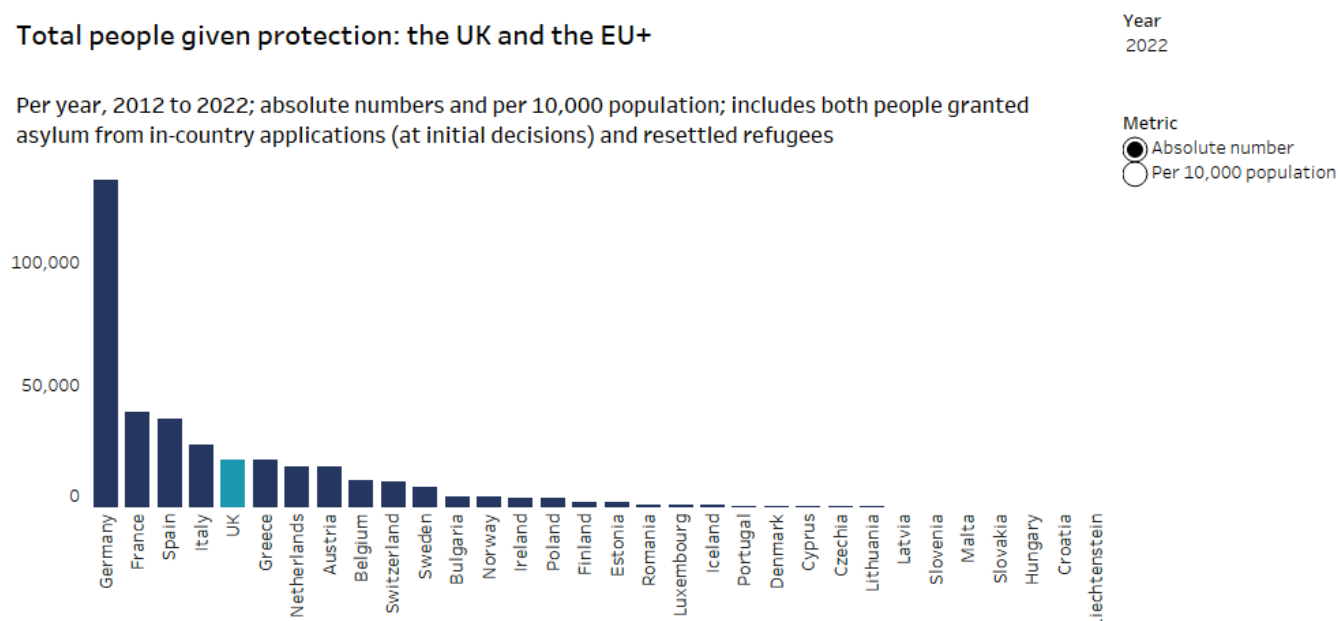


When looking at *all* people given protection in 2022 – including through both the in-country asylum route and through refugee resettlement – the UK ranked 5th among EU+ countries (Figure 15). The UK falls to 20th place in the ranking when adjusting for population size.

Figure 15

Total people given protection: the UK and the EU+

Per year, 2012 to 2022; absolute numbers and per 10,000 population; includes both people granted asylum from in-country applications (at initial decisions) and resettled refugees



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D02 (June 2023) for UK data; and Eurostat Statistics, 'First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex (migr_asydcfsta)' (positive decisions), and 'Resettled persons by age, sex and citizenship (migr_asyresa)'. Date of data retrieval: 19 October 2023, for EU countries. Population estimates are from Eurostat, demo_pjan, as at 1 January in each year, except for the UK for 2021 and 2022, which uses ONS mid-year 2021 and 2022 estimates.

Note: 'Grants' includes all people receiving a *positive* grant, which includes a grant of refugee status, authorisation to stay for humanitarian reasons, or any other kind of permission to stay, *at initial decision*, excluding the results of appeals. The success rate of applications in any year cannot be calculated by dividing the number of grants by the number of applications, because grants will be made with respect to applications made in previous years. UK resettlement data excludes refugees resettled under the Afghan Resettlement Schemes.



Evidence Gaps and Limitations

We do not know how many people the UK has ever granted asylum or another form of asylum-related protection to, because published statistics go back only as far as 1979. Moreover, these published statistics record the outcomes of initial decisions only and do not take into account appeals, which increase the number of people that are ultimately granted asylum-related permission to stay.

The government does not provide regular statistics on asylum claimants broken down by their method of entry into the UK. Therefore, we do not know what share arrived by visa-free travel, on a visa, using fake documents, or by clandestine means, such as by small boat or stowing away on a lorry.

Nor do we have clear information on how long asylum applications take. Data are provided on the share of applications receiving an initial decision within 6 months, and on the number of applications currently pending, but it is not possible using existing data to calculate how long it takes the 'average' asylum application to receive an initial decision or final outcome.

There is also limited information on what happens to refused asylum seekers. Some depart with the assistance or oversight of the government, for which data are available. However, others depart without notifying the authorities, or remain in the UK as irregular migrants (see the Migration Observatory briefing, [Irregular migration in the UK](#)). Data on people departing the UK have improved in the past few years, in part due to the introduction of 'exit checks' in 2015. However, significant data gaps remain for earlier cohorts.



The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk

About the authors

Peter William Walsh
Senior Researcher,
The Migration Observatory
peter.walsh@compas.ox.ac.uk

Nuni Jorgensen
Researcher,
The Migration Observatory
nuni.jorgensen@compas.ox.ac.uk

Press contact

Rob McNeil
Head of Media and Communications
robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk
+ 44 (0)1865 274568
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

Recommended citation

Walsh, P.W. & Jorgensen, N. (2024). *Asylum and refugee resettlement in the UK*. Migration Observatory briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford

